

State of Connecticut

GENERAL ASSEMBLY



PERMANENT COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN

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**Testimony of
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Before the
Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee
Tuesday, March 1, 2005**

RE: R.B. 6708, An Act Concerning the Workforce Readiness of the Jobs First Program Participants

Good morning Sen. Hartley, Rep. Willis and members of the committee. My name is Leslie Gabel-Brett and I am the Executive Director of the Permanent Commission on the Status of Women. Thank you for this opportunity to testify in favor of R.B. 6708, An Act Concerning the Workforce Readiness of the Jobs First Program Participants.

The Permanent Commission on the Status of Women sees this proposed bill as one of the most important legislative initiatives of the session because it addresses a persistent, unsolved problem and offers a path out of poverty for low-income families receiving Temporary Family Assistance (TFA). As you may know, nearly half the people in the time-limited Jobs First program do not have a high school diploma, and only 12% have any post-secondary education.¹ Yet without a high school diploma, it is nearly impossible to secure a job. If we want to unlock the door for these parents and their children, we must invest in basic education including literacy, numeracy and English as a Second Language, and provide skill training in occupations that lead to employment and wages sufficient to gain economic security. The proposals in this bill are also a sound investment in our state's economy because businesses across the state need workers with good basic skills.

¹ *At-A-Squint, Jobs First Employment Services Participants Served by CTWorks, October 2004*

The proposed bill includes four components:

- First, it requires the Department of Labor to do a more thorough assessment of Jobs First recipients who lack a high school diploma or who have low literacy or math skills. We cannot help recipients overcome barriers to employment if we do not have enough information about what those barriers are. Moreover, if we do an inadequate job of assessing recipients, we will waste public dollars on programs that will not work.
- Second, it requires the DOL to provide more basic education to Jobs First participants including literacy, numeracy and ESL, and vocational education programs that integrate basic education in them. There is considerable research that shows that adult learners are more likely to succeed if reading and other basic skills are taught within the context of job training and employment opportunities, rather than in a traditional classroom. In addition, models that combine education with work will help Connecticut meet its participation requirements under the federal TANF law and help recipients make a successful attachment to the labor force.
- Third, it requires the providers of these basic vocational education programs to report on how many recipients enter and complete these programs, how many gain employment and what wages they earn. We want these programs to be successful and accountable.
- Fourth, the proposed bill allows DSS to grant an additional extension of time to participants who are in a program that is part of their approved Employment Plan and is not longer than six months. We know that some participants need more time to learn to read or to learn a job skill and, as long as they are participating in good faith and making progress, we should avoid wasting their efforts and public dollars by simply cutting them off too soon.
- Fifth, the bill proposes to reallocate \$18 million to fund the assessment, basic education and vocational education detailed above.

As you may know, the state of Connecticut receives approximately \$267 million of TANF funds from the federal government, and is required to match it with \$184 million in state ‘maintenance of effort’ (MOE) funds, for a total \$461 million in our state budget that must be spent to assist “needy families.” Out of \$461 million, only \$14 million is currently allocated for the Jobs First program, and the majority of that amount is spent on case management and “job readiness” activities. As much as \$131 million of the TANF and MOE money is allocated to a category labeled “other” in the state’s reports to the federal government and includes spending for DCF, SDE and other state agencies.

While the programs for which these funds are spent are certainly important, **we strongly suggest that re-allocating funds for activities that help parents in poor families get the education and skills they need to get and keep a decent job is a better state policy.** If families have a chance to lift themselves out of poverty, for example, we will have less need to spend

money for DCF investigations of neglect. Prevention and family independence are preferable to poverty and state intervention.

The link between education and training and economic success is clear. The Center for Law and Social Policy released a report entitled *Built to Last: Why Skills Matter for Long-Run Success in Welfare Reform*² in which they summarize the results of numerous national studies and Census data that demonstrate the link. For example, one national study of welfare recipients found that each year of schooling beyond high school increased wages by about 7 percent.³ Census data from 1999 show that women with an associate degree earn more than twice as much as those without a high school diploma (about \$24,000 annually compared to about \$11,000) and 37 percent more than those with only a high school diploma (who earn about \$17,000).⁴

The PCSW participates in the Welfare Working Group, convened by the Legal Assistance Resource Center (LARCC). We spent more than six months, last summer and fall, talking with recipients, providers, state officials and others to identify the most urgent problems in the Jobs First system and to generate solutions that would work. Many good solutions are contained in this bill. They will require the reallocation of state spending but they will bring a great return on investment when low-income parents are better able to work and bring economic self-sufficiency to their families. Thank you.

² Karin Martinson and Julie Strawn, Center for Law and Social Policy, April, 2003.

³ *Ibid.*, citing Corcoran, M., & Loeb, S. (2001) Welfare, work experience, and economic self-sufficiency. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 20(1); see also Kane, T. J., & Rouse, C. E. (1995, June) Labor market returns to two and four year college. *American Economic Review*.

⁴ *Ibid.*, citing U.S. Census Bureau. (2000, December). Table 9: Earnings in 1999 by educational attainment for people over 18 years old and over, by age, sex, race, and Hispanic origin: March 2000. Washington, DC: Data cited is for females between the ages of 25 and 64, with earnings.

